

Going ethnic in Greece

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It seems that these days you can seldom open a newspaper or watch a TV bulletin without being confronted with one of the many ethnic conflicts currently being waged throughout the world. From Bosnia to Bangladesh, Grozny to Gaza or Canada to Cyprus, the last three decades have undoubtedly seen a sharp upswing in the occurrence of ethnic insurgency. That does not mean, however, that ethnicity (the consciousness of belonging to an ethnic group) is a product of the modern world – in fact, it has existed for as long as human groups have sought to lay exclusive claims to territory and positions of power.

Migrations and invasions

In antiquity, Greece was populated by a number of ethnic groups (the word 'ethnic' is actually Greek in origin), but the most important – as well as the best-known – were the Dorians, the Ionians, and the Achaeans. These groups enjoyed a fairly widespread distribution throughout the Aegean area. What united geographically remote members of the same ethnic group was their belief that they were distantly related and that they had originally occupied the same territory. They attributed their later more far-flung distribution to a chain-reaction of migrations that began, according to Thucydides, eighty years after the Trojan War (in our terms, somewhere in the twelfth or eleventh centuries B.C.). First of all the Dorians marched southwards from their original home in central Greece and conquered the southern and eastern Peloponnese, the islands of the Southern Aegean and the south-western coast of Turkey. This migration forced the former Achaean inhabitants of the Peloponnesian cities of Argos and Sparta to flee to the northern coast of the Peloponnese (an area that has continued to be called Achaea right up to the present day). In turn, the Ionians who had originally occupied the northern Peloponnese were ejected by the Achaeans and migrated eastwards, settling in Attica, Euboea, the Cycladic islands, and the western seaboard of modern Turkey.

Whether any historical reality lies behind these ancient tales of migrations is a matter of hot dispute and need not concern us here: for now it will suffice to state that the ancient Greeks generally believed them. Perhaps more interesting, however, is whether members of one ethnic group were conscious of being in some way different from members of another ethnic group.

For scholars earlier this century, it was self-evident that every ethnic group possessed its own unique and exclusive 'character'. According to this theory, no two ethnic groups would act in exactly the same way, but would differ in terms of the rituals they practised, the dress

they wore, or the everyday objects that they used. This suggested to archaeologists that the ethnic groups of the past could be identified by isolating different or new types of artefacts among excavation material.

Dorians, archaeologists, and punks

Initially the twelfth and eleventh centuries B.C. (ushering in what is conventionally known as the Early Iron Age) appeared to offer evidence for a number of radical new practices. New forms of swords and spearheads were taken to indicate the coming of warriors, while previously unknown types of brooches and pins were thought to reflect the adoption of a new form of female dress (known as the 'peplos') which was fastened at the shoulders. The newly-attested practice of cremation seemed to mark a distinct break from the custom of inhumed burial during the preceding Bronze Age. A new kind of painted decoration on pottery was represented by the so-called 'Protogeometric' style (named because of its preference for continuous bands of circular and triangular shapes). Above all, the period was thought to be characterised by the substitution of iron for bronze in the manufacture of tools and weapons. All these cultural innovations were attributed to the arrival of the Dorians in southern Greece.

Unfortunately few of these new features can now be associated with the Dorians. Firstly, greater refinement in archaeological dating techniques has revealed that many of them – for instance, the weapons, brooches, and pins, as well as the introduction of iron – occurred slightly earlier than was once thought, belonging to the Bronze Age rather than the age of migrations. In other words, they were already in use in southern Greece by the time the Dorians are supposed to have arrived. Secondly, innovations such as cremation and Protogeometric pottery are first attested in Athens and the surrounding region of Attica. In antiquity, the Athenians claimed at certain times to be aboriginal inhabitants of their land and at other times to be Ionian settlers from the northern Peloponnese, but if there is one matter on which all the sources agree it is that the Dorians never occupied Attica.

In fact, a moment's thought will show that it is unrealistic to expect an exclusive correlation between certain types of artefacts and a particular ethnic group. Apart from anything else, there is the complicating factor of trade and exchange between groups. To take a hypothetical example, imagine an archaeologist of the future who is excavating a typical house of the 1990s in Milton Keynes. On the principles that were followed in the case of the Dorian migration, our archaeologist might take one look at the television, the VCR, the hi-fi, the washing-machine and even the alarm-clock and conclude (quite erroneously) that Buckinghamshire had been invaded, or at least colonised, by Japan or Korea in the post-war period.

Another problem that archaeology cannot always solve is the fact that different human groups (including ethnic groups) may use the same objects as each other but in different ways. In other words, 'it's not what you do, it's the way that you do it'. For example, one of the most important 'badges of identity' for the punk movement in the 1970s was the use of the safety-pin, but our fictional archaeologist of the future would soon run into trouble if he or she were to assume that every attested instance of a safety-pin in the archaeological record represented the one-time presence of a punk-rocker.

Language, religion, and – race?

In short, there is no good evidence today to suggest that ethnic groups in ancient Greece were characterised by any exclusive use of certain objects or adherence to a specific pattern of daily behaviour. If the Dorians really did migrate into southern Greece, then it is possible that – like the Mongols in China – they simply adopted the objects and practices of the pre-existing populations in the areas they settled. Were there, then, any other ways in which the ethnic groups of ancient Greece might sense themselves to be distinct?

Language often acts as an important symbol of ethnicity – for instance among the French-speaking Walloons and the Dutch-speaking Flemings in Belgium, or the English-speakers and French-speakers in the Canadian province of Québec. Many scholars recognise that the ancient Greek language can be subdivided into dialect groups – particularly Dorian and Ionian – which do broadly follow ethnic lines. That said, there are often considerable differences between various dialects even *within* the Dorian and Ionian groups, and there are always exceptions such as the city of Halicarnassus (modern Bodrum on the Turkish coast) which was ethnically Dorian but spoke an Ionian dialect.

Similarly, religion may play an important role in ethnic identification as it does among the Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats, and Muslims of Bosnia, or the Catholics and Protestants of Northern Ireland. Again, however, in Greece ethnic and religious affiliation did not always coincide. Herodotus tells us that the festival of the Apaturia was exclusive to the Ionians, but adds that the Ionian cities of Ephesus and Colophon did not participate. Likewise, it is common for scholars to regard Apollo as a peculiarly Dorian god, though it was Apollo's sacred island of Delos that acted as the meeting-place for an ancient festival of the Ionians which was resurrected by the Athenians in 426 B.C.

I have postponed until now the issue of physical similarities and differences because it is this element of ethnicity which has been most abused – particularly through the racial philosophy of the Nazis. The fact is that physical features are very often irrelevant to one's ethnicity: there are, for instance, few if any physical differences between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland or Serbs and Croats in the former Yugoslavia. No ancient literary source suggests that Dorians, Ionians or Achaeans looked different from one

another, and examination of skeletal material from various areas in Greece hardly contradicts the literary picture. The reason for this is that physical features are not ultimately determined by ethnicity, but by environmental factors such as climate, diet, and resistance to disease. Certain physical features (e.g. skin colour) may take a long time to adapt to new environmental conditions, but others (such as skull shape) may change within a single generation. Clearly, where two ethnic groups inhabit the same region – particularly where this cohabitation has been for a long period of time – there will be little or no physical difference between them.

The elusiveness of ethnicity

Furthermore, one's ethnicity is not an inescapable destiny imposed at birth. Firstly, individuals can decide that their ethnicity is simply not important (English ethnicity is not generally very significant today except during European championship football matches). Secondly, individuals can change from one ethnicity to another, as many Albanians in modern Greece have done. Thirdly, individuals can hold more than one ethnicity, stressing at different times now one, now the other. This is most obviously the case with children of mixed marriages, but an often-cited example from antiquity can also illustrate the point.

In 508 B.C., King Cleomenes of Sparta attempted to enter the temple of Athena on the Athenian acropolis when the priestess ordered him to withdraw since it was not permitted for Dorians to enter. His response was: 'But woman, I am not a Dorian, I am an Achaean'. In a sense, he was quite right. On the one hand, he was a king of Sparta and Sparta, as everyone knew, was a Dorian city. On the other hand, however, he belonged to the royal dynasty which traced its ancestry back to a time before the arrival of the Dorians when the Achaeans had ruled over Sparta. Had it been forbidden for Achaeans to enter the temple of Athena, no doubt he would have played the Dorian card for all it was worth.

If one is left with the impression that objective definitions of the ethnic group in ancient Greece are somewhat elusive, then that is a conclusion that has also been reached by those who research ethnicity in the modern world. What members of an ethnic group share is not so much the same physical features, language, religion or customs as the belief (however fictional) that they are related to one another. This consciousness of being related is not always constant, but will normally depend on contemporary social, political, and economic factors. In Greece, for instance, the distinctions between Ionians and Dorians became particularly relevant in the second half of the fifth century as a result of the growing conflict between the Ionian city of Athens and the Dorian city of Sparta which eventually erupted into the Peloponnesian War of 431-404 B.C. The two groups even applied derogatory characteristics to one another: according to Thucydides, the Spartan general, Brasidas, encouraged his troops before battle by comparing their Dorian courage with the weakness of their Ionian enemies.

Yet less than a century later this antagonism between Ionians and Dorians is less evident. Sparta had virtually faded from the picture after her defeat by the Thebans at the Battle of Leuctra in 371 B.C., while for the Athenians the danger now lay not so much with Sparta as with the northern Greek kingdom of Macedonia under its ruler, Philip II. Rather than stressing their Ionian identity, the Athenians attempted to portray themselves as defenders of Greekness against a royal aggressor whom they regarded as a non-Greek barbarian. Ironically, it is the son of this 'barbarian', Alexander the Great, whose image adorns today the stamps and coins of the modern Greek nation. There could be no clearer illustration of the fluidity of ethnic definitions.

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